

Comments on Plan BTV – South End

By Erik Brown Brotz

44 Catherine St.

Burlington, VT, 05401

864-9572

erik@burlingtontelecome.net

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Following are my personal comments on the June 2015 draft of PlanBTV-South End, divided into sections on the Champlain Parkway, other Walk-Bike issues, and other issues including housing and parks.

Champlain Parkway

The Champlain Parkway, despite attempts to scale it back, is still an outmoded attempt at a solution to an outmoded “problem.” We do not need an extension of the highway into the South End. While I recognize the value of removing truck traffic from neighborhood streets (Pine, Flynn, and Home), I don’t think it makes up for all the downsides of adding new roadway and the problems associated with that. We want to move beyond a car-centric culture, and thus I do not recognize any value in being able to deliver more cars to downtown or Battery Street. I strongly believe that the whole Champlain Parkway should be scrapped and we should start over with a new visioning of what we really want.

If however, the Champlain Parkway is still being built, it needs to be brought further into scale and alignment with the current vision of the South End and what makes a livable community. The rest of my comments in this section are aimed at improving what seems to me to be a flawed concept.

New Road section – 189 to Lakeside.

Don’t cut off Pine St. The worst aspect of the current design of the Champlain Parkway is cutting off the end of Pine St. from Queen City Park Road. This substantially reduces connectivity in the South End, makes public transportation more difficult, and enhances the feeling of a limited access highway on the Parkway itself. Instead of the current design, the project should be designed with a roundabout at the intersection of Parkway, Pine St., and Queen City Park Road. The section of the Parkway from the end of 189 to this intersection should be clearly designed as an exit, not a continuation of 189. Truck traffic should be banned from turning onto Pine St., but allowing cars to use Pine St. would spread the traffic out and reduce congestion at the various intersections.

Reduce design speed. The design speed for the new section of the Champlain Parkway should be no more than 30 mph up to Home Ave, and reduced to 25 thereafter. Design vehicle should also be made as small as possible, allowing sharper curb cuts, reduced lane widths, and pedestrian treatments.

Improve Bike/Walk facilities. While the proposed mixed use path is better than nothing, it is far from the state-of-the-art facilities we should be expecting with this large an investment in new infrastructure. Having to cross the road to get to biking facilities (or to continue on them) is a significant discouragement for all cyclists, regardless of ability. Mixing pedestrian and cycling uses is also problematic because it is unsafe for both and also discourages use by a large number of cyclists who prefer to ride fast. The ideal would be separated walking and biking facilities on both sides of the Parkway.

1. Protected bike lanes (aka cycletrack), separate from walking facilities, should be provided on both sides of the Parkway.
2. If it is not possible to provide protected bike lanes on both sides of the parkway, it should at least stay on the same side of the road, unlike the current design which has it changing sides at the intersection with Home Ave.
3. There should also be sidewalks on both sides of the Parkway, although this is less critical than bikeways, at least in the earliest sections.
4. If true separated walkways and bikeways are not possible, the mixed use path should be wide enough to allow separate walking and biking sections, with a painted separation.

More roundabouts. The intersections of the Parkway with Home, Flynn, and Lakeside would all be significantly improved by conversion to roundabouts. This would improve traffic flow and safety for both motor vehicles and pedestrians. Care needs to be taken to ensure that biking safety is not compromised but is improved by the roundabout design. The intersection with Lakeside should also be aligned with the driveway of the Innovation Center (or the driveway aligned with it).

Make it a real neighborhood street. I think the “limited access” nature of the Parkway should be eliminated after its intersection with Home Ave., making it a real city street. This means merging it with Briggs Ave and allowing driveways to connect to it. This will help with traffic calming and with ensuring that the road feels like a part of the neighborhood, not a bypass.

Improve connections. There are several ways in which connectivity with the surrounding community should be improved compared to the current design. See the December 2014 Burlington Walk-Bike Council letter on the Champlain Parkway for more details.

Lakeside/Pine St. section

Separate walking and biking. While the proposed mixed use path along the west side of Pine St. is a significant improvement over current conditions, again it is not adequate considering the investment being made. In this section in particular, pedestrian activities are expected to increase, which will be incompatible with cycling. A protected bike lane and separate sidewalk should be established along this entire section.

Improve northbound biking. A significant portion of cyclists will choose to ride on the road rather than use an off-road path on the west side, especially if it is a mixed-use path. This is especially true for north bound cyclists. The current plan for on-street biking facilities (not clearly defined in the PlanBTM

document, but outlined in a memo from the DPW consultants this winter) is no better than, or perhaps worse than, current conditions. The marked door zone will be perceived as a bike lane and encourage riding in the door zone. Anyone not riding in the door zone will be in the car lane, and will most likely be perceived as obstructing traffic, leading to conflicts with motorized vehicle drivers. There are several options for improvement, listed below. While I understand that there are concerns about changing the cross-sectional shape of the road, I think this concern needs to be re-examined, and a way found to allow additional options.

1. By far the best option would be to remove on-street parking, allowing room for protected bike lanes in both directions.
2. Moving parking to the west side of Pine St. would allow for a northbound bike lane that is not next to parked cars. Southbound bike traffic is more likely to use the new path than is northbound traffic.
3. Moving the curb to allow space for both parking (perhaps in fewer locations than currently) and a north-bound protected bike lane would also be a significant improvement.
4. The proposals by Local Motion and the BWBC for a bike lane between the parked cars and the curb, while imperfect, would be an improvement over the current design.

More roundabouts. The intersections of Pine St. with both Lakeside and Maple St. should be converted to roundabouts, which would improve traffic flow and pedestrian safety. Use of a roundabout at Lakeside and Pine would also eliminate the need for a southbound right turn lane, providing more space for biking facilities in that section. Mini-roundabouts at the cross streets of Locust, Howard, Marble, and Kilburn would both allow for traffic to enter from the side streets more easily and safely, and also provide traffic calming, improving safety for pedestrians and cyclists.

Other Walk-Bike issues

There are many good aspects of the current plan for walking and biking. I like all of the new walking paths and connections, if they can be accomplished, including connections to the waterfront, bikepath extensions and connections, neighborhood paths, sidewalks and buffer zones, etc. The following are a few comments for further improvement.

Improve the rest of Pine St. On Pine St. from Queen City Park Road to Lakeside, we need protected bike lanes, sidewalks on both sides, protected pedestrian crossings, and streetscaping to encourage walking and biking and enhance the feeling of neighborhood. While some elements of this are suggested for some areas, it is not clear that all of these are in the current vision for the whole corridor.

Ensure complete bus service. Bus service should serve both Pine St. and the Champlain Parkway (if built), as well as Flynn Ave, not just the Parkway (page 89). It should also connect to South Burlington. The absence of an intersection at Pine and Parkway would make this difficult.

Connect to new Calahan path. For the new path from Calahan Park to Champlain School, there should be a way to access the path from Pine St. I suggest adding connections from one or more of the driveways/parking lots, such as Burlington Bagels, SoYo/New World Tortilla, or any of the others.

Minimize pavement with bike path addition. If indeed we can get a new park in the space currently owned by Blodgett (which is one of the best things in the whole plan), and if a new bike path is added through that area, then it should not run directly along the beach as currently shown - rather it should just cut over from the existing bike path to the driveway. This would minimize the addition of pavement, and also leave the park area with unobstructed access to the shoreline. We do not want a bike path right along the shoreline here.

Other Comments

Housing

I agree Burlington needs more housing, though not at the cost of the city's scale, affordability, or artist community. Ultimately the real work on making Chittenden County's housing situation better is to concentrate development of housing in town centers in South Burlington and Williston – allowing them to become semi-urban rather than suburban, and putting housing near employment and other destinations to minimize travel distances and improve community. Any addition of housing in Burlington needs to ensure that the scale is kept livable, that it does not contribute to real estate inflation, and that it meets the needs of working class and middle-income residents.

No more high-end housing. We do not need more second homes or high-end expensive housing in Burlington – all added housing should be affordable, with a mix of options and prices including both the standard definition of affordable (low-income, subsidized) and also middle-income housing. Also make sure that housing is for actual residents, not for vacation homes (I have heard rumors that many recently added apartments in the downtown area being used as vacation homes, though I have not confirmed this).

Be careful within the Enterprise Zone. Within the Enterprise Zone I share concerns about pricing artists out of the market. Limited development of housing in the Lakeside area seems feasible, as long as it doesn't include high-end housing. I think the only housing added to the Pine St. section should be work-live spaces, but care needs to be taken to ensure that the work-live spaces don't result in higher rents, so they should be limited and with clear guidelines. The rest of the Enterprise Zone should be off limits to housing.

Parks

Burlington needs more parks, and the ones suggested in this plan are all great ideas, including Barge Canal, Blodgett, and the Linear Art Park.

Move entrance to Calahan Park. The new entrance to Calahan park should be shown at the southwest corner (by Burlington Bagels), not the northwest corner (by Locust St.). Or it could be both.

Other

Preserve essential facilities. The plan is not at all clear about what will happen to the trash/recycling dropoff center, or to Resource and Rebuild. All of these services and facilities need to be preserved, as

they serve valuable functions for the city. If the plan for Pine St. is not compatible with their continued presence there, then it needs to have a plan for their relocation. They could be moved to Flynn or Industrial Parkway, but they should not be pushed out of the city or eliminated, and it would be best if they were maintained in the South End. I do NOT feel the need to preserve the mini-storage facilities or the oil tanks off of Flynn Ave – these are blights on the neighborhood.

Maker'hood. The Maker'hood seems like a nice idea, but I am skeptical that such a thing can be planned effectively, using new buildings. I expect rents on new buildings will be too high for most start-ups. These should only be done if they will actually be affordable for the intended market. The plan should focus on maintaining affordability of existing spaces.

Convert parking lots. I would like to see existing parking lots on Lakeside and Pine St. turned into more useful and attractive buildings, or parks. Let's find a better way to deal with transportation than devoting acres of land to parking lots.

Add community center. As the plan mentions, the South End really needs a community center like the Miller Center in the NNE, for indoor recreation and community activities. Whether it is attached to Champlain School or not is less important, although a Pine St. location would be better than Flynn Ave.

Incorporate Co-op. Since this draft was released, the Onion River Co-op (City Market) has purchased land off Flynn Ave. I am not personally happy with the location – Pine St. or Sears Lane would have been much better. I would love to see an effort made to accommodate the Co-op in a more appropriate location that is more accessible to more people.